MARX AND ENGELS: DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONARIES
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BOOK REVIEW: *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough,* by August H. Nimtz Jr (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000)

August Nimtz tells us his book's three central themes are: 1. Marx and Engels were the leading protagonists in the democratic movement in the nineteenth century; 2. “they were first and foremost political activists, and not simply 'thinkers'”; 3. their practical political experience was central to shaping their theories. An African-American scholar who has previously published *Islam and Politics in East Africa*, Nimtz is a professor of political science at the University of Minnesota. An association with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of the United States is suggested in the footnotes of this volume. But the value of his work transcends organizational boundaries, and some of the insights in his book are rooted in a familiarity with on-the-ground politics consistent with the experience of Marx and Engels.

A blend of revolutionary theory and action

Nimtz honors Hal Draper's "insufficiently heralded work on Marx and Engels". Draper's four fat volumes *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution* (published by Monthly Review Press) plus his three-volume Marx-Engels glossary, register, and chronicle, as well as Richard N. Hunt's two-volume *Political Ideas of Marx and Engels* broke much of the ground that Nimtz covers. But here, in a single volume of 300 clearly written and well-documented pages, we get a survey of much previous scholarship but, more important, a survey of the writings (including the correspondence) and the political activities of the two revolutionaries.

An initial chapter on the context and beginnings of Marx and Engels's revolutionary partnership is followed by three chapters on their involvement with the Communist League and the revolutionary upsurge of 1848-49. Next comes a fine chapter comparing the thought and political activity of Marx with that of liberalism's intellectual hero, Alexis de Tocqueville. Another chapter shows that the long ‘lull’ in the class struggle, stretching from 1850 to 1861, was one in which Marx and Engels remained engaged in practical and organizational work – which formed an important prelude to their involvement in the International Working Men's Association (the First International of 1864-1876), to which Nimtz devotes three more chapters. The final chapter focuses on Engels's political work in the years between Marx's death and his own.

One could use this as a guidebook for the 50-volume Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, and also as a political biography worth setting beside David Riazanovs classic *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*. More than this, it offers a challenge for those drawn to the spirit of Marx's famous eleventh theses on Feuerbach – that the point for revolutionaries is not simply to understand the world but to change it. Nimtz is not content merely to reproduce the ideas of his two subjects. He interacts with them and offers interesting ideas and interpretations.

There is a refreshing rejection of Lenin-bashing as he emphasizes an elemental and multi-faceted continuity between Marx, Engels, and the Russian revolutionary. He also is severe in his rejection of the kind of 'class-baiting' that some working-class activists indulged (in) when disagreeing with some of Marx's ideas. (We are all inconsistent of course, and Nimtz himself does some class-baiting of those 'petty-bourgeois' academics – such as the late pro-Marx but anti-Lenin Richard Hunt – who disagree with Nimtz's own interpretations.) One of the best features of the book is the many times he draws our attention to Marx-Engels quotations and ideas with which most readers are unfamiliar. For example, he points out that the young Engels was inspired by the Seminole Indians' resistance to "White European encroachment" in 1830s Florida, commenting that both Engels and Marx were confident in "the ability of the oppressed to overcome their oppression". He touches on points of relevance to national liberation, anti-racist and women's liberation struggles. He also very usefully traces the importance of the peasantry and the centrality of the worker-peasant alliance in the thought of Marx and Engels.

More than this, the relationship between capitalism and democracy, according to Nimtz, is illuminated by the fact that "the 'self-organization of the working class' in the second half of the nineteenth century was responsible for the democratic breakthrough, that is, the institution of 'universal suffrage,' and the acquisition of civil liberties." In this he cites the important 1992 study *Capitalist Development and Democracy* by Dietrich Rueschmeyer, Evelyne Stephens and John Stephens (though equally relevant is Geoff Eley's just-published *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000).*

Essential in the thrust of working-class democracy, Nimtz documents, were the intellectual and practical-political labors of Marx and Engels in the Communist League, in the 1848 upsurge, during the quiescent interlude that followed, and then in the years of the First International and the Paris Commune. The serious-minded political work (not just theorizing) of Marx and Engels for twenty years before the First International's founding in 1864,

we are shown, was essential in enabling them to play a central role in its development And Nimtz is especially good in conveying a sense of the crucial importance of the First International in the larger political developments of the 1860s and 1870s, and particularly in the development of the labor movements of Europe and North America.

Class, revolutionary transition, democracy

Yet the book also provides some less positive surprises. There is an odd and recurring fuzziness around the basic Marxist concept of class. The term 'working class' is defined as "employed manual labor outside of agriculture". This dramatically narrows what one finds in the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*: the working class consists of those making their living through the sale of their ability to labor. Nimtz also uses the term middle class quite loosely – sometimes seemingly to imply that it is similar to 'petty bourgeois' or perhaps to 'non-manual' employees. In the Europe of Marx and Engels, however, the term referred to the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class (the upper class being the landowning aristocracy).

At times this confusion seems to intrude into Nimtz's discussion of practical political questions. While more than once he stresses the importance in Marx's and Engels's strategic thinking of the need for a workers and peasants alliance, there are times – especially referring to the tumultuous revolutionary events of 1848 – when he speaks of a broader 'people's alliance' that would include workers, peasants, the petty-bourgeoisie (one assumes this means small shop-keepers, artisans, and craftsmen), and 'sections of the middle class'. This multi-class coalition, Nimtz makes clear, is to bring into being a multi-class government. Such conceptions have been utilized, since the 1930s, by Stalinists and reformists to rationalize class-collaborationist (and ultimately disastrous) 'People's Front' efforts.

That this is not Nimtz's intention is clear from much else in his book – for example, his subdued but explicit criticism of aspects of Marx's 1848 activities, his explicit rejection of both Stalinism and reformism, and his useful emphasis that the key political texts of Marx and Engels are the *Communist Manifesto,* their 1850 *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,* Marx's 1864 *Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association,* and Marx's 1871 classic *The Civil War in France*.

Taken together, these four works provide a clearly revolutionary working-class orientation. More consistent with these texts and with what Marx writes in *Capital* are later Marxist analyses that Nimtz ignores – by Ernest Mandel, Harry Braverman, and others – indicating that a process of 'proletarianization' has been making more and more sectors of the labor force

(among agricultural laborers, service workers, so-called 'professionals', and so on) part of a working class embracing the great majority of the people in more and more countries throughout the world. Nimtz's drift into 'multi-class' strategic conceptions might be overcome with greater clarity on the question of class.

Perhaps worse is his double bungling of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat which Marx and Engels saw as political rule by the working class, what many now call a workers' state. The term 'dictatorship' is not meant to imply rule by a small group, but rather the fact that – in the structure and policies of the new revolutionary state – the 'cards are stacked' in favor of the working class, just as, even in the most democratic republic today, they are stacked in favor of the capitalist class. Revolutionary socialists often point to the short-lived Paris Commune of 1871 as a positive example.

In 1891 Engels commented: "Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat." Marx, in *The Civil War in France,* described it as follows: "The Commune was formed of municipal councilors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class." Far from being the instrument of a single revolutionary party, the Commune's elected representatives were from several different parties. A more descriptive term for the regime favored by Marx and Engels would be workers' democracy.

Nimtz disagrees.

First of all, he denies that a workers state can co-exist with a capitalist economy. Nimtz uncharacteristically criticizes Engels for asserting that the Paris Commune (which did not have time to eliminate capitalism) was an example of the dictatorship of the proletariat (workers' rule). "Engels may well have overstated the case of the Commune to score points," Nimtz insists, adding "it seems reasonable to conclude" that Marx would have preferred to view the Paris Commune as "the dictatorship of the people's alliance, that is, an alliance of the proletariat and its allies ..." In his footnotes, he cites an article by US SWP leader Mary-Alice Waters that elaborates the concept of "workers and farmers government' – which asserts that a workers' state cannot exist until the capitalist economy is eliminated through revolutionary nationalizations, that revolutionary regimes that have not yet done this should be called workers' and farmers' governments. *(See Prosper Lissagaray* History of the Paris Commune*, New Park Pub., 1976 – Web Ed.)*

One can only assume that Nimtz would also reject the standard interpretation offered by Lenin in 1919: " 'Soviet power' is the second historical step, or stage, in the development of the proletarian dictatorship. The first step was the Paris Commune. The brilliant analysis of its nature and the significance given by Marx in his *The Civil War in France* showed that the Commune has created a new type of state, a proletarian state." Contrary to Nimtz's convolutions, it would seem that Lenin and Engels were accurately representing the views of Marx that quite simply, a workers' state must first come to power in order to initiate the process of eliminating capitalism.

Nimtz also throws a question mark over the democratic content of the notion of workers' rule. After all, he asserts, the *Communist Manifesto* calls for 'despotic' policies. This may be utilized to offer a 'Marxist' rationalization for undemocratic policies of 'revolutionary' regimes, but it seems inconsistent with the *Manifesto*'s embrace of "the proletarian movement (as) the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority".

It is illuminating, therefore, to turn to the actual passage where Marx and Engels use that word. They tell us that "the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy". They tell us that the working class will use this political supremacy to "wrest by degrees" control and ownership of the economy from the capitalists. They elaborate:

"Of course, in the beginning, this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which in the course of the movement, outstrip themselves, necessitate further inroads upon the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionizing the mode of production."

The 'despotic' inroads are not directed against democratic structures – they are, in fact designed to utilize the political democracy achieved by the working class for the purpose of creating economic democracy: socialism. Nimtz's questioning of the centrality of democracy in the revolutionary transition period brings him uncomfortably close both to Stalinist and to anti-Communist interpretations of Marx. Once we push past such theoretical tangles, we see that the realities confirm Nimtz's own central assertion in this book that Marx and Engels were "the leading protagonists of the democratic movement" of their time.

Revolutionary organization

Fortunately, such theoretical tangles do not intrude into most of this study. Somewhat more intrusive is the way Nimtz discusses the organizational question – he makes reference to the "Marx-Engels team" and "the Marx party" so frequently, and in such varied contexts, that confusion is inevitable – especially since "the Marx-Engels team" appears to be simply another way of saying "Marx and Engels", and what is meant by party is more often than not referring "to a political tendency and not an organized current" (and can include sometimes just Marx and Engels, sometimes those who agree with the basic ideas of the *Manifesto*, sometimes old friends from the stormy days of 1848, sometimes those who agree with Marx and Engels inside the First International).

But as Marx's biographer Franz Mehring put it: "their supporters, as Marx himself admitted, did not represent a party." Nimtz prefers a different way of putting it – that, more often than not "the party was still not convinced that circumstances required an organized formation". Nimtz all too often seems to be straining to make the political activity of Marx and Engels equate with his own conception of Leninism. He demonstrates quite well that the logic of Marx's practical work is consistent with the logic of his theoretical work. It can be argued, without any need for straining, that both are consistent with the theory and practice of Lenin. But there are new elements that Lenin himself developed – it is not necessary to expect Marx and Engels to have done everything!

The direction in which Nimtz is going seems, however, entirely valid. Marx's detractors and even some of his partisans generally miss a key aspect of what he was doing. To the extent that they look at his practical political activity at all – especially his conflicts with others inside the labor and socialist movements – they tend to see a tactless, impatient and argumentative ego, somehow lining up and manipulating various pals, more often than not hurling polemics and mobilizing cliques that were "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing".

What Nimtz is able to highlight is a much more consistent coherent principled mode of operation on the part of a numerically fluctuating current of co-thinkers. It has political meaning. There is a correspondence between analysis, strategy, tactics. What Marx and Engels and their various comrades hoped to accomplish was related to how they functioned – even without an organization – and they were able to have a profound impact in the broader organizations and movements of which they were part. Such efforts contributed to the later crystallization of socialist workers parties in a

number of countries. More work needs to be done – by activists no less than scholars – to understand all of this more clearly. As part of that effort, Nimtz has provided a valuable contribution. □